

Emergency Rescue for Soviet Germ Plasm

Plant scientists with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations are planning an emergency survey of six plant gene banks in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union next month, with an eye toward determining whether any of the gene banks are in need of Western "seed money" in order to stay firmly rooted.

Plant germ plasm from more than 120 gene banks worldwide

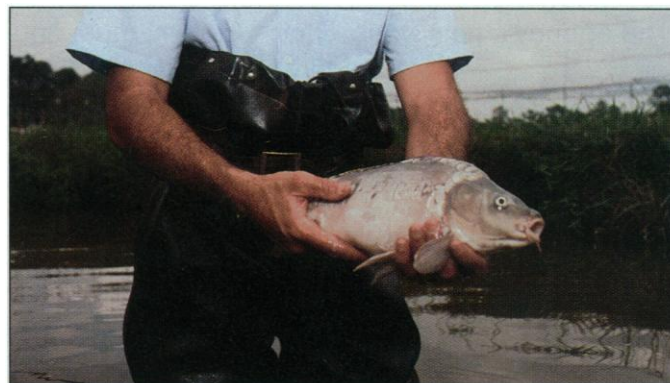
has become a ubiquitous part of modern agriculture. In the former Soviet Union, for example, the genetic makeups of all rice and cotton plants—as well as 70% of its cereals and legumes—arise from samples of germ plasm (known as ascensions) archived at Russia's Vavilov Institute (VIR), one of the gene banks on the FAO's emergency list. VIR's freezers contain about 344,000 ascensions; another 150,000, including valuable varieties of apples, grapes, and sunflowers, are stored at five other gene banks in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine.

Since the 1950s, the FAO has served as a matchmaker, introducing gene banks to countries wishing to invest in certain types of germ plasm, says Jose Esquinas-Alcázar, who heads FAO's Commission on Plant Genetic Resources. Because plant species are becoming extinct more and more rapidly, however, the FAO launched a campaign last fall to strengthen the world's plant gene banks. The remedy for those in the former Eastern bloc may be simple, says Esquinas-Alcázar: "More money."

More Controversy Over Patriot Missile Critic

Under pressure from Congress, the Pentagon announced last week that it will remove its post hoc "secret" classification from MIT professor Ted Postol's already-published critique of the Patriot missile. This action ends an inquiry into whether Postol leaked classified information. But although the tug-of-war between freedom of inquiry and national security appears to be over, controversy lingers over the actions of the Patriot's manufacturer and Postol's editor.

The builder of the Patriot, the Raytheon Co., has conceded that it was the informant that tipped the Army to the possibility that Postol might have disclosed secrets



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Department of Agriculture rules governing release of transgenic animals could have gaps that exempt industry-sponsored research.

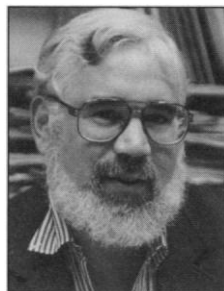
Biotech Rules May Have Industry Loopholes

Rules now under consideration at the Department of Agriculture (USDA) may soon plug long-standing gaps in federal regulations related to field-release experiments of bioengineered animals, plants, and insects. To win White House approval, however, agency officials may be opening a loophole for industrial research.

To scientists on federal advisory panels, the threats posed by such field-release experiments are small but real. Genetically modified fish, for example, could theoretically supplant indigenous species or disrupt normal food chains. For that reason, some researchers voluntarily take extensive measures to prevent accidental release of transgenic fish from the secured ponds where scientists monitor them. Environmental groups want to make sure every researcher is this conscientious.

USDA officials sympathetic to this view have already produced several draft proposals that have not pleased the White House, which has consistently argued for relaxed biotech regulations. To compromise, USDA may merely stipulate reviews by local biosafety boards—rather than by federal agencies—and apply the new guidelines only to researchers who accept USDA funding. But environmentalists contend that these rules, while welcome, would fall short. To them, leaving privately funded research, such as that by commercial fisheries, unregulated creates a loophole big enough for a genetically altered great white to swim through.

in his paper for the Harvard journal *International Security*. (In that article Postol argued that the Patriot may have failed to hit most of the Iraqi Scud warheads it targeted in the Persian Gulf war.) Spokesman Pat Coulter, however,



Ted Postol

rejects any suggestion that this action was an attempt to stifle criticism: He claims the company simply had a duty to report breaches of security.

Meanwhile, Postol is upset that Steven Miller, editor of *International Security*, declined to comment

on Postol's charges that Raytheon tried to prevent the publication of the Patriot article. Contacted by *Science*, Miller said that he and the editorial board have taken "a vow of silence" on this subject to preserve the journal's image as a "neutral vessel."

MIT president Charles Vest was somewhat more forthcoming: He met with Postol and later issued a statement of support—after the Pentagon had already backed down. Vest's official words of support: "The right of a faculty member to speak publicly about the results of his or her research or opinions is fundamental and must not be abrogated."

Official Doubt on the AIDS Test Patent

The 1987 Franco-American patent on the AIDS blood test was intended to preclude years of litigation and bad feeling over the Gallo-Montagnier dispute—the tussle over who deserved credit for isolating the virus and developing a test. But the ground beneath the patent was shaken when the General Accounting Office and the Health and Human Services inspector general launched investigations into an alleged U.S. "coverup" of evidence that contradicts the American claim. And now even NIH director Bernadine Healy has acknowledged that the patent looks a bit rickety.

In a 10 March letter to FBI special agent Alan Carroll, who has been investigating leaks of confidential materials from NIH's Office of Scientific Integrity (OSI), Healy complained that a "swirl" of news reports have "already demonstrably damaged the credibility of the U.S. government's position on patent and other related business matters." These reports on the OSI investigation of NIH researcher Gallo have detailed apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in legal documents underlying the American blood test patent (*Science*, 16 August 1991, p. 728; 15 November 1991, p. 944). According to Healy, the cost of these news leaks "must be measured as substantial and likely in the millions of dollars."